

# **BENT BARS PROJECT**

## **Newsletter**

### **Issue 2 Autumn 2010**

## **Welcome to the second Bent Bars Newsletter!**

Welcome and thank you again to everyone who has contributed their thoughts, poems, images and information to make this another really powerful resource for linking our communities both within and across prison walls.

It has been a busy year for Bent Bars and the small collective has been working hard to respond to all the communications we receive. Each week brings another large bundle of letters with new requests, news from those who have now become old friends, news of situations that anger us, bring sadness, inspire us deeply, make us laugh out loud and question our perspectives.

It is a challenge to keep track of everyone contacting us from inside and outside, but we now have more than 70 long-term ongoing penpal connections. We are really thrilled that this includes those between people who were inside penpals, have now been released and are now writing to others still inside.

Since the last newsletter many people have contacted us with their responses to it: ideas, suggestions and constructive criticism. All are greatly appreciated and we have published a selection of those that give an idea of all the different feelings the last newsletter inspired. We have added to that many new pieces of writing in response to our call out for people's thoughts on the subject of safety, following on from issues around coming out. The newsletter also contains creative pieces, images and practical advice all related to people's experiences as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people within the prison system.

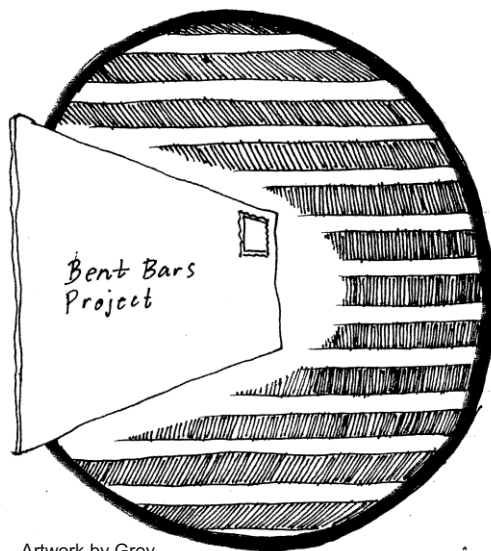
In this project we remain constantly aware and questioning of the systems and attitudes that repress, harm and criminalise us. For this reason we find the ideas expressed here - about safety, risk, expressions of personal freedom, working together to build strength and solidarity - valuable for all of us inside and out.

We can honestly say that when our small group first embarked on this project we had not the slightest idea what we were starting. The response to our one small advert in *Inside Time* 18 months ago has been in turn exciting, inspiring, challenging and frankly overwhelming. We really had no idea so many people were in need of this connection. We want to thank you all for your infinite patience waiting for replies and penpals, for trusting us with your thoughts and words and for giving so generously from your ideas and experiences.

We hope that you find something you were needing in these pages.

From your friends in the Bent Bars Collective

*This newsletter is dedicated to all those who were not able to contribute to it for whatever reason. It is for those who have been silenced through fear, pain, violence and shame. It is for all those who find courage and strength in other ways and means...*



Artwork by Grey

# Letters

## *to the editors*

### **Lifting the weight...**

The last newsletter was about coming out in prison and it had a major effect on my life as I was out to close family members but not to anyone else. After reading the newsletter I gave it a lot of deep thought and read it over and over, it answered many questions that I wanted to ask but didn't know who I could ask. The fact that the newsletter covered both the pros and cons was a big plus. After a week of reading the newsletter and going over it in my head I took the huge step, for me, of coming out. At first it was to a friend and the reaction I got from him gave me the courage to come out openly to all, not just in the prison estate. I felt, and still feel, there's a huge weight been lifted off of my shoulders and I've never felt better within myself both mentally and physically. As expected there were the one or two idiots, for lack of better words, who made an abusive comment or tried to put me down to others but overall the support and acceptance of all was more than enough to let them roll off my back and they were usually put in their place by other cons. I'd like to give a massive thank you to all at Bent Bars, and those who submitted their thoughts, for making the first newsletter such an important one both for me and others.

Wullie.



### **What respect is...**

*The Bent Bars Project has provided me with something I could never achieve on the outside, I have made a good friend through the penpal service. A person who looks past the initial situation to the person. This is so important to me.*

*I never expanded my own sexuality through any groups or scenes. I feel this service gives me hope that people will still treat me with respect and can live my life knowing my sexuality is not an issue."*

*Ross*

## Poetic Suggestions


Firstly I would like to say congratulations and well done with the first issue of the newsletter which I very much enjoyed reading. I was very interested to read about what other inmates experienced when they came out of the closet and how they coped.

I finally admitted that I'm gay about a year ago now and I felt a great sense of relief knowing that I don't have to hide my sexuality anymore. It's like a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I was absolutely terrified when I admitted openly that I am gay, but the support I got here from my friends on the wing, and from all the officers and all the other staff here was absolutely fantastic. And I would like to thank all of them for their support. I was so relieved with the support I got here that I cried that night. It was such a good feeling that I don't have to hide who I really am anymore, and I now feel I don't have to feel ashamed anymore because I'm gay. I hope and pray that I will one day meet someone who will give me a second chance in life and spend the rest of my life with.

Anyway, as for ideas for the newsletter, how about a page or two for poems? And how about being able to write in to make comments about the articles and poems that are in the newsletter as well, which would be good. And how about advertising some things such as organisations that can help people.

Anyway, I will look forward to receiving and reading the next issue of the newsletter with interest. And hopefully sooner or later you will be able to match me up with a pen-pal which will be really nice.

Thank you,  
Until next time  
Best wishes,  
Paul.



*Thanks for your letter Paul. We really welcome comments from readers on any of the content of the newsletter as we hope this will be a space for ongoing communication and discussion among readers. We now have a poetry section and included your contribution. Thanks to all who sent their poems, we'd love to include all the articles we receive, but unfortunately there isn't enough space. We are also working on a directory of groups and supports for LGBT prisoners (see last page for details) and would welcome suggestions for inclusion.*

**The Bent Bars Collective.**

## Call my name

I would like to comment on your decision to withhold people's full names on the grounds of safety... I for one am very proud of myself for having the courage to be open (even in prison) about being a gay man... If I and others are happy for you to print our full names... Please don't silence us, make us anonymous... We have and will always have to fight against homophobic attitudes and behavior and those people would always want us to be silenced... We exist but they don't want to hear us, and although I respect, understand and appreciate there will be men who don't want full names to be disclosed, those of us who give permission to publish our name [in full] should be granted that wish... Maybe you should ask your readers in the next issue, or put a disclaimer with... If I have a story to tell, or something to say on any issue, I want people to know the words I use come from me and I would welcome you to print my name in full!

Although I appreciate it would be quite a task to collate such info prior to publishing... I, and no doubt the vast majority of readers, would welcome a list of prisons where there is an existing support group in place... I personally have been banging on doors here at Lindholme for the last 6 months to have a gay, bi and trans support group put in place... Our first meeting [took] place on Monday 9th November 2009. Success!... It's not been easy to make it happen, but luckily the officers in this prison (well, some of them) are very supportive and have helped me push this project forward.

When I move to my next prison, I want it to be to an establishment that already has such a support group in place, though I fear very few prisons have it... What a shame! But those that do should be printed in your next issue, so that other inmates like myself can make a more informed decision about our transfer moves and hopefully be able to land somewhere that has a support group and help us to feel and be safer, more comfortable with the move.

If you would like me to, I will happily do all I can to find out which prisons have an active support group, although as I'm sure you can appreciate it may take some time (I have plenty though - time!). If I gave you a list... Would you print it? [Editor's note: YES! See page 20 for details on contributing to our LGBTQ prisoner directory]

I have many positive suggestions for the newsletter, though I will leave it here for now and await your comments on the two matters raised, but please be aware that I am happy to help and contribute to the project in any way I am able to, so if there is some way I am able to help others... Please let me know as I am very pro-active in trying to change how we do our time!

I hope you are all well and wish to say a great, big thank you for the work you do to try and make our lives inside a little more bearable

Thank you!  
Yours sincerely, and always with a little cuddle!  
Dave x

*Thanks Dave, we really appreciate your feedback. We celebrate with you and all others who are "out and proud" in prison, and do not wish to prevent anyone from expressing themselves. The Bent Bars Collective had long discussions about this, and we made the hard decision to only publish first names, initials or nicknames primarily for reasons of safety. We are very aware that there are many risks in publishing people's full names, risks that can include violence or harassment, but also other consequences that might arise following release. Because the newsletter circulates quite widely — both within and beyond the prison system (and on our website) — it could be read by anyone, and we don't want to risk accidentally outing people to someone unexpected. We also are aware of the many legitimate reasons why people might not be "out" and we don't want to create a hierarchy between those who are and aren't out. For all these reasons we feel it is better to err on the side of caution and not print anyone's full name. But we very much hope that one day in the future this won't be necessary. The Bent Bars Collective.*

# FEELING Safe, KEEPING Safe

From Sooty

**To me** feeling safe has many meanings.

In prison I am safe in the fact that I have a roof over my head, food provided, hot water and clean clothing. I am safe because I have my network in prison.

These things don't change the way people view me. It does not protect me from the unsafe aspects of jail. Healthcare doesn't provide me with sexual health check-ups or protection.

The prison doesn't protect me from homophobia that some staff laugh along to and treat as a free joke at my expense. It doesn't protect me from the next idiot kissing their teeth and bumping their gums. I do that myself in the only way that works... physically.

Outside of prison I am safe in anonymity, I am not a known face.

I am safe with my family and my choice of partners. I am safe because I can get the healthcare I want and choose. I am safe because I have choices.

I am not safe from homophobia, but I can walk

away from it. I am not safe from being escorted from clubs by security because I'm in the ladies' and have been mistaken for a guy because of my short hair, BUT I can choose not to go there again and have the right to complain to the manager.

Where are our rights in prison? We complain and get nowhere. The lack of choices, lack of rights and lack of humanity is what makes prison unsafe for me. Living in a world where the rules change daily to suit the powers that be in a place [where] they claim they are: "...Committed to equal opportunity policies. Discrimination and harassment on the grounds of ethnic origin, religion, belief, sex or sexual orientation or any other irrelevant factor is unacceptable. Improper behaviour on the part of any member of staff, prisoner or visitor will not be tolerated."

Yet they do not live up to or abide by their own mission statement.

And they call this safety!

## **Practical Information on Books, Magazines and LGBT Press**

Submitted by Charlie – recent ex-prisoner

LGBT prisoners should find that their prison library already has or will get appropriate books for them. Anti-discrimination legislation is generally well complied with.

The main problem at some prisons is getting "lifestyle" or "top-shelf" type magazines aimed at the LGBT community. Despite being illegal to discriminate, some governors still have a policy which effectively discriminates. However, if the prison allows heterosexual titles it must also allow the LGBT equivalent.

Should you have any problems you should submit a complaint by completing a Request Complaint Form (COMP1). Quote the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman decision printed in Issues 23 (November 07) of the "On The Case" bulletin from the Ombudsman's office. This refers to a complaint brought on the issues of "gay soft pornography", where a prison governor was allowing heterosexual material but not the homosexual equivalent. The Ombudsman upheld the complaint and the governor had to issue a new non-discriminatory policy. If necessary, go through the full complaints procedure and take your complaint to the Ombudsman. Unless there are specific reasons why an individual prisoner is not allowed access to such material compared to other prisoners in that particular prison, you are going to succeed with your complaint. So persevere.

(This advice is a summary of Counsel's advice as part of a case I am bringing against one of my former prisons).



## On the topic "keeping well, keeping safe"

From Ross

Safety to me means having someone who can protect you from the bad things in life. Feeling safe can be a lock on the door (a bit of a cliché there, I know), proper clothes and loving relationship, be that family or partners. Being unsafe can be a reckless lifestyle, a bad home environment, others threatening you with violence because of your sexuality or your offence.

To feel safe you need one thing, love. If you know someone cares for you it can give real perspective to life.

I have found my first year in prison very hard, but it is made easier knowing that my Mum and Dad love me and the friends I have left feel the same. That's safety for me.

If I were to advise anyone about being safe or keeping safe, is to take a long look at yourself and test every choice you make in your life and compare it to someone you know and love. If it doesn't meet their standards, you're leading an unsafe life. Sometimes those who know you well can spot things you can't, learning more about yourself can make you more safe and secure in body and mind.

### **First Step**

By Abz

Open the doors of Narnia to face reality  
L.G.B.T.Q.'s embrace your sexuality  
Never again feel stressed, depressed or in a state  
one life, one chance, take a leap of faith.

Mum, dad, culture, religion make you feel ashamed  
While blind to see the inner struggle or feel your pain  
Immams, priests, rabbis, twist words of God almighty  
to mentally oppress so many in our society.

Break the chains, free your suppressed feelings  
in the power of your inner strength start believing.  
Travelling towards the undisclosed you'll feel proud  
the only difference for me no girls allowed.

Stand tall in a crowd, say "here I come"  
I'm still the same person, only the magic is undone.  
Chances to enjoy life you only get one.  
Why should others dictate what's right or wrong?



Artwork by Dell



## Re: Safety and Wellbeing

From Charlie, recent ex-prisoner

**T**he whole idea of safety in the prison environment is subjective. The very nature of prison means that there are unpredictable, volatile, and violent people threatening safety. On top of that you have the bullies, who actively seek out the weak and vulnerable. Anyone who doesn't fit in or stands out in any way is more vulnerable.

Inevitably that still includes those who are even suspected of being anything other than heterosexual. Strong characters or straight acting people are generally safer. Others are more vulnerable, which explains why many end up on the Vulnerable Prisoner units/wings. Unfortunately this will mean that they get branded as sex offenders regardless of their actual crimes. This may well partly explain why gay men in prison are often automatically branded as sex offenders by the ignorant.

Staying safe in prison is largely dependent on doing the same things you would do on the outside. It's just that bit harder to avoid

certain types of people you usually would. As a result of this your time in prison can be more stressful through being on your guard to a greater degree. Chances are that sooner or later your status will become known, but this can be a good thing if it brings you into contact with other people like yourself, from which you can gain support and strength in numbers. However, do not be afraid to use the Listeners, diversity rep. (if there is one) or even a sympathetic member of staff. The prison has a duty of care which includes making you as safe as possible. But that very much depends upon you making any problems known to staff.

**Mental, physical and sexual health is meant to be provided for and you are entitled to the same standards that you would receive on the outside from the NHS.** That includes condoms, even though if you are caught having sexual activity with another prisoner it is common for this to be regarded as an offense against Good Order and Discipline.



## ***A Weight off my shoulders***

For many years I've lived a lie,  
pretending I'm straight,  
when I know that I'm gay.  
Many times when I was alone,  
I've sat and I've cried.  
I felt trapped, being someone I'm not.  
Who could I tell?  
Who could I trust?  
Who could I talk to without being judged?  
Family and friends I couldn't tell,  
as fear of rejection took over my life.  
In front of family, and in front of friends,  
I was crying inside, without shedding a tear  
I was living a lie, too scared to come out.  
All them years pretending I'm straight,  
being someone I'm not was tearing me apart.

I've finally done it, I'm finally there,  
I've found the courage and admitted I'm gay.  
Tears of joy roll down my face,  
no more hiding, no more living a lie.  
I'm out of the closet, what a relief.  
A weight off my shoulders,  
a weight off my mind.  
A second chance, I hope I'll get,  
to be the real me, without living a lie,  
so I hope and pray, that one day I'll meet,  
my Mr. Right, waiting for me.

By Paul.

## ***You've got the power***

You've got the power, to rule  
your own world.  
You've got the power, to stop  
the hurt.  
When you're in danger,  
where do you turn,  
don't feel a stranger,  
have you seen the size of the  
world.

When people hide behind a mask,  
that's when you ask yourself,  
is there a reason.  
To cover up, and run away.  
When there's no need to be a stranger.  
Why don't you talk to someone,  
and trust in a face.  
And open up and then count  
yourself in the race.  
We should all be acting like  
sisters and brothers.  
With more of us out, we can  
get in front of the racing game.

By Jason.



Artwork by Grey



**From James R.**

To yearn for a world that I cannot touch,  
to suffer in silence unable to love,  
to dream of a future inspired with hope,  
is a fantasy I crave beyond this endless joke .

To remember a name of someone I once knew,  
to bring to mind memories of things I've been through,  
to breathe unpolluted air and to gaze at stars in the sky,  
to suffer homophobic torrents in silence, unable to cry.

To gaze through bars being surrounded by hate  
To imagine my freedom beyond the now invisible gate,  
To look for comfort when I'm feeling alone,  
To remember every single day that this, this disgrace is not my home.

I dream and I hope, I pray and cry  
but... I also know who I am inside  
I am someone whose faith in life, whose love and passion  
cannot, will never nor ever surrender to death and die.

## Memory Lane by Queenie

As I lay awake at night while others  
are asleep  
i take a trip down memory lane to be  
with you again.  
no-one knows the heartache i try so hard to hide  
no-one knows how many times I've  
broken down and cried  
I cry because i love you  
I cry because I care  
I cry because when i wake up  
you are never there

## Wrong body, wrong jail By Chris

I sit and wander everyday  
Why I'm sitting here today  
In my shell  
A living hell  
All I can do is dress like a man  
Hoping they'll understand  
Being careful who I tell  
Of the person in this shell

I change my name  
To feel myself  
And suit who I really am  
A man trapped in two jails  
My body and a building  
Those are my two jails.



## What is love anyway?

By Jason

Why are people not always proud?

Of who they love, there's no need to feel unsound towards the views of homophobia. To bully someone, they just don't know or hope to.

It's them that are the weak. We share the seeds that we sow: The mind and body just make us stronger and our feeling grow.

Count yourself in, you're not just another number. Bent Bars can help you through the rain and thunder. We can grow like trees if we get the water.

Don't forget you're somebody's son or daughter. In our hearts we all beat as one.

So lets get together and shine like the hottest sun. What is love anyway? Only you know the answers.



Artwork by Blog Sleazo Sketchtown's Artist/Writer



# Experiences on coming out

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In the Autumn of 2009 the Bent Bars Project published its first Newsletter dedicated to the subject of coming out and being out, inside and outside prison. These are some of the responses we received since.

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## From Phil...

It was interesting to read everyone's different perspective on the best way to 'come out' in prison, or even if it was better to 'stay in' while inside.

Everyone has their own individual factors that need to be taken into account. In the newsletter there were stories by Pedro and Michael, who had to overcome cultural barriers. Some guys have problems with peer pressure from friends or family. Others don't even have family or friends for support. Add to this attitudes in different prisons, unhelpful prison officers, other prisoners who see you as a quick way to amuse themselves for 10

minutes, and pad-mates who can make the difference between making your life hell or being your best mate.

Plus of course, there may be 101 things going on in your life, coming into prison in the first place, losing friends and family, losing your home, upcoming court appearances – the list is endless.

What may work for one person in one prison may not work for someone else in a different prison. There are no set rules as such. However, I do agree with what J.E. said in his story in the [previous] newsletter: be honest to yourself first. Then if you are honest with other people, then in time, they will come to respect

you. Yes, you will always get remarks and the like, but don't let them get you down. Some people who are in prison are very opinionated anyway. I'm sure that if you walked along the landing with a Man Utd shirt on or a big badge saying 'Vote Labour' then I'm sure the other guys would say something. And if you wore Grandma's knitted jumper which has a picture of Rudolf the red nosed reindeer on the front, well...

I just wanted to add that personally, I've not had too many problems from other prisoners and in the two prisons that I have been in so far, I've not had any problems from any of the officers. Everyone has been really great!

# Big Frank's view!



I have spent the last nine years in prison as a lifer and have spent the past seven as an openly gay man. I read with interest the different views and experiences in the BB Project's first newsletter, I've also just finished reading August's issue of GT magazine in which there was a similar debate about politicians and other public figures being openly gay. I'd like to share my view in the hope that it may help others.

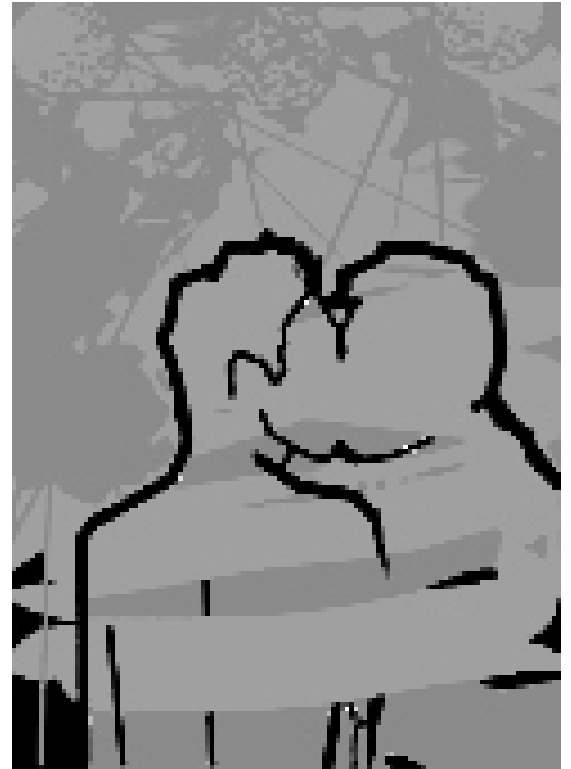
There can be no doubt that as an openly gay prisoner you will at some point face at the very least harsh words! I've faced my share of problems and discrimination from both prisoners and staff alike but I wouldn't change my decision to 'come out', not for a second. Being gay is not everything that I am but it is a huge part of who I am and I take the approach that you can take me or leave me. Not everyone likes the fact that I'm gay but the majority at least respect my honesty and openness. I've met a lot of people in jail who have had little if any experience of 'gays'! I've enjoyed educating them and dispelling a lot of prejudices and fears about gay people. I like to think that the next gay person these people encounter will have an easier time. If we as a community hide away and pretend to be straight then the prejudices will continue because they're not challenged. My advice to anyone would be to be who you are, stand up and be counted. But be prepared for those who will have a problem with you and remember that a lot of it will be based on fear. Not everyone I have met has been prepared to face or challenge their fear but many of those who have, have become good friends, who in fact supported and defended me when I had problems. One guy who wouldn't even go into the showers when I was in there, went on to defend me when an officer called me homophobic names in front of a landing full of prisoners. I'm proud to say that it was the officer who walked away with his head down and his tail between his legs!

I spent many years hiding who I am, never knowing if my friends who accept and like me for who I really was, now I know that my friends respect and like the real me.

So be proud and be confident, fight the prejudices for the sake of generations to and, though it might sound corny we can make a difference.

Poem by Mullie

When people looked into my eyes,  
How could they not see the lies?  
“She's nice”; “She'll do my every whim”,  
What I wanted was on her arm, HIM!  
You can never deny what's inside,  
It's a painful feeling the need to hide.  
Well it got too much, too damn sore,  
I'm not hiding for a second more!  
There's something that I need to say,  
Friends, Family, Everyone, “I'm gay”.  
No rejection or hatred directed at me,  
Just acceptance, live and let be.  
The years of worry and total fear,  
Of falling on society's spear.  
All gone, they were all in vain,  
No need for the lies and the pain.  
I've broken my chains and I'm finally free,  
Free from the lies and free to be ME!



## From Lee:

Hello, my name is Lee. I am a 23 year old gay lad currently in the HMP system locked up 22 hours a day.

Well, being openly gay in prison causes a lot of problems as some small minded prisoners think it's funny to cause you many problems but what I've found [can help] is to hold your head up high, ignore them, don't give them a reaction as they will want one, speak to a diversity rep, get advice.

Being gay in prison (especially) if you're very open about it is brave to admit, as prisons are full of small minded lads.

However you will find some prisoners don't care and will accept you for who you are, not what they want you to be. Don't push your sexuality in people's faces, that will cause you a lot of problems and things can escalate very quickly in prison.

Stay safe – speak to lads you know you get on with.  
Don't leave yourself open to be a target.

I have made so many mistakes being incarcerated since 18 years old. And you can learn quickly from your mistakes.

### Lee's Advice:

- Ignore
- Walk away
- If getting grief, tell someone
- Hold your head up high
- Don't give them a reaction

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# MY COMING OUT IN PRISON

From Ian

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→ It was May 2006, I always felt like I have to tell someone that I am gay, but I did not have the nerve to do it. Before I came to prison one of my best friends used to tell me to tell my wife that I am gay because it is best to let her know. I knew that it was selfish and wrong of me to lead her astray. However back in prison I said to myself that if I made a new friend I would tell him that I am gay and if he still wants to be my friend that's cool, but if they don't want to that will be their loss and not mine.

So I built up my confidence to tell this guy that is my friend (so I think) and I make him promise me that he will not tell anyone and he say "yes". But one day we have a disagreement about Christianity and gay, and the very next day he put my name in the box saying that I make 'a gay suggestion to him' and he got me moved off the wing, but I did not know this until a friend saw me and say that 'my boy and the officer are saying that I have tried to have sex with him, and is it true?'. My heart start to beat really fast and I start to feel strange and I deny it all.

So now it is all over the prison and every time I come out of the cell I can see everyone looking and talking about me and even off the wing the people that I used to talk to don't want to talk to me any more. So a really good friend saw me and asked me if it is 'true that I am gay?' and I said yes I am, and he say that he will still be my friend 'because I am a good person and some of his friends are gay, so that is OK'. However I did loose a lot of friends that were good to me before they found out that I was gay because they don't want their friends to think less of them.

So this is when I start to know about panic attacks, because every time I come out of my cell and off the wing to go somewhere people will shout out things through their window like Faggot, Batty Boy and Kill all Batty Man, but no one would come face to face and say it to me. But a lot of people did not believe that I was because of the way I act and I am Black.

So I decide to be proud of how I am and wear the gay flag on my chest like superman did with the S.

Before, when I used to go to Visit to see my boyfriend I

want to kiss him but was too frightened of what people would think. I really did hate my friend for outing me, but I really want to thank him for outing me because he help me do something that I want to do for a long time and don't have to be ashamed, and that is to give my boyfriend a big kiss at visit so that everyone have no doubt about me being gay. That is when I start to lose the so called friends that I have left, and most of the black guys and the Jamaicans start to play [the type] of Jamaican music that don't like gays.

I get into two fights because I am gay, and most people think because you're gay you can't fight, and I did win the two of them but that is something I am **"I don't have to pretend to be somebody else but myself"**

ashamed of because it does not do me any favour but make things worse.

After the smoke clear, I am so glad to be out and everyone in prison know that I am gay and I love every minute of it and a big weight off my shoulder and I don't have to pretend to be somebody else but myself and I love to feel like a superstar.

Coming out is the best thing that ever happened to me in life, apart from having my son. I wish I did do this from an early age. And now I am Diversity Rep and I am trying to let the Governor let us have the same rights as straight guys have.

So if you are afraid of coming out don't be, and don't let them win by making you do what they want you to do because I used to do the same thing. You may get the odd look from some and you may loose a lot of friends too, but if they can't take you for what you are then they were not your friend in the first place, and never be ashamed of who you are.

I don't know what it's like to be out in the outside world, but I can't wait to be with beautiful and happy people, and not have to wonder who will see me.

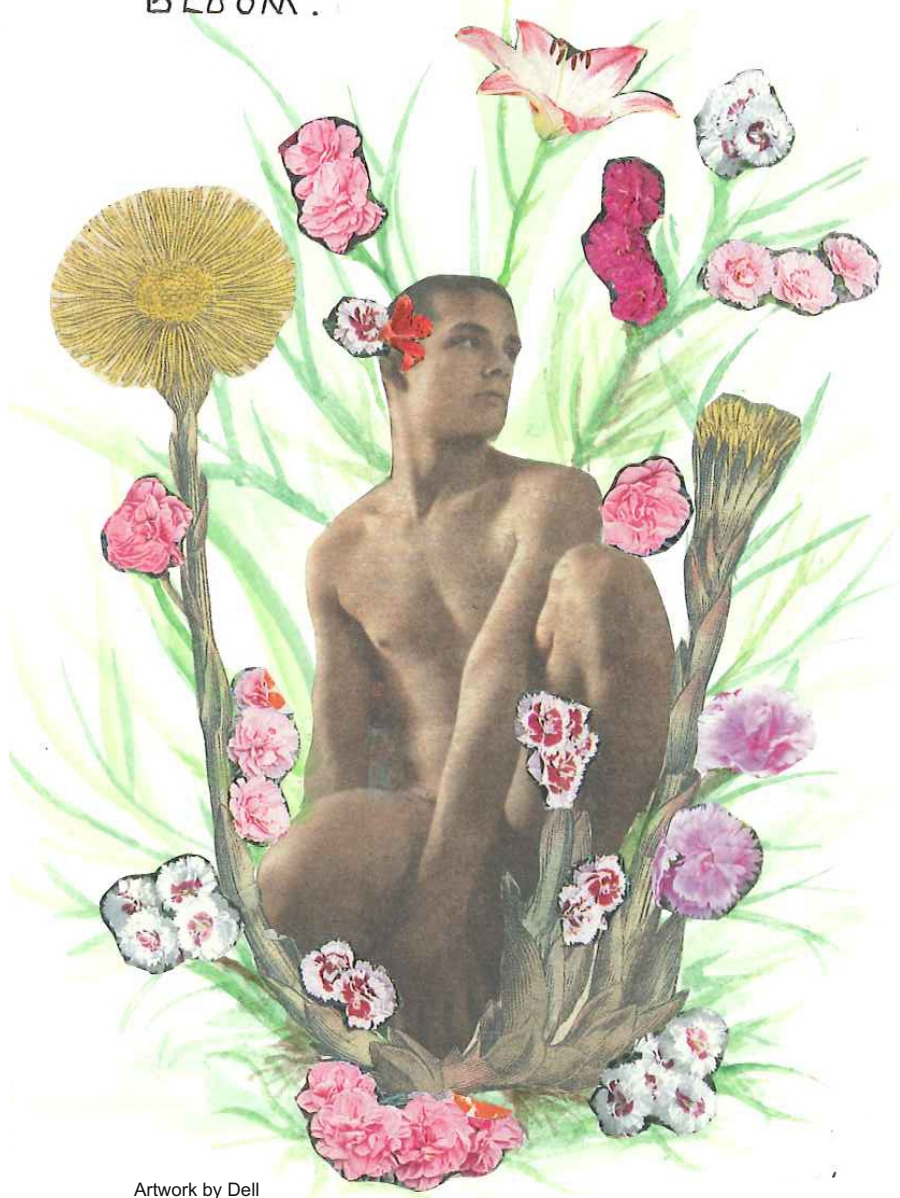


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## General Thoughts and Feelings. from Wullie.

The biggest fear I had about coming out, let alone coming out in prison, was that I'd be alone. Although there's less prejudice towards LGBTQ people in prison nowadays there are not many fellow prisoners who are openly out! The penpal I started writing to through Bent Bars was great as I felt that I now had someone I could talk to and ask about various issues and someone to just talk to as well. I always had the fact I was gay and living a constant lie going around in my head and generally making me feel down, moody and grumpy. Now I don't have that worry, I've never felt a greater sense of well-being, and that has got me to a better place both physically and mentally.

Buddy in  
Bloom.



Artwork by Dell

This is only part of my journey as now I'll be able to make new friends and be able to have a boyfriend openly and not need to lie or hide it. As for feeling safe, I'm not sure how I feel about that as I still don't feel entirely safe but then again that's part of prison life anyway, even though it's not supposed to be these days, as you always need to be on your guard against the odd idiot.

I feel better than I have ever done and I'm trying in my own way to educate the prisoners around me that even though someone is gay or trans or just different doesn't mean they're a freak or a bad person and that we are people too. I think that because I was probably the last person they thought was gay, has opened a lot of prisoner's minds and changed some of their mind sets too.

# The hidden man

FROM CHRIS

I'm Chris, 37 years old and just finishing the last 5 months of a 4 year 8 month sentence. My appearance has always been a 'tom boy' style.

In 2006 I was remanded to Bronzeheld prison. Being put in a female prison, at first reminded me of boarding school with all girls, but it soon kicked in as a very lonely place, found it hard to fit in, I felt odd being in a female prison psychologically. After I was sentenced in 2007, I was sent to Downview prison. This is when I hit a rock bottom and said to a gay female officer who I got on with the fact that I don't like my breasts, and she said I could have them removed. This is the point where I was seriously reconsidering my gender and I asked the library for some information off the internet on Transgender Female to Male, and I researched it. I started to ask people at that prison to call me Chris, there was only a few I could open up to and tell why. In 2008 I was baptised and confirmed as ChrisJoe in the chapel there.

I've been to several establishments during this sentence, and support around this journey of mine has been varied between jails, some better than others.

I was on license in 2008 and enjoyed spending my discharge money on men's clothing. It felt so natural going to the male department.

I was only out in community for a month, and when I was recalled back to Bronzeheld prison I started to address my gender issues with staff, and the G.P. there last year - 2009- made a referral for an assessment at the G.I.C. in Charing Cross.

In my research I read that before your assessment you have to have been living as a man 'The real life test' to be sure, and to be in work by the second appointment. So I think I will be having my first appointment when I'm back in the community as it is very hard to live as a man in a prison environment.

There were one or two staff members at Bronzeheld that said 'you represent a female jail and we'll call you by the name on your arrest warrant'. It is a big place, some have big attitude problems with people that are seen 'different' to themselves.

I am not very open about my sexuality in the prison I'm in now because of fear more than anything. I get laughed at, as it is with the way I am. Quiet, hearing difficulties, mental health problems like anxiety. People will pick up on a weakness and prey on you. So if I dared utter a word about my sexuality, I'd never hear the end of

it. And yet there are others who are gay, have disabilities and don't get no hassles. I can't wait till January to get back out there and continue my journey.

I was grateful to find this support from the Bent Bars Project, where we can safely share our experiences and problems with people who care and understand our journey through life.

This prison is a big place and although they have a good diversity policy set up, still staff and prisoners can be very selective to who they spend their time with and how they give emotional support. Like if one is upset, staff will choose whether to just say ignore it or give a comforting hug. There is a lot of favouritism in the way some are

treated. When I don't get hugs from staff members

*"It felt so natural going to the male department"*

and I see another was just as upset and has a hug... I can't help thinking because I'm gay the officers and certain inmates don't want to touch you with a barge pole. I feel a lot of rejection because I find it hard to form friends especially in here. So I'm glad that I found a penpal through Bent Bars that's going through the same journey and supports me in this isolated situation I'm in at the moment. ■

## From S.S.F.

**T**he question of “coming out” or “staying in” the closet is indeed a difficult one and is going to be different for everyone, and there is of course no right or wrong answer, however there are factors that can sway you in making a decision, so here is a skimmed down version of my story.

I am currently serving my first sentence, happily open about my sexuality on the outside and a very confident individual, I do not consider myself an effeminate guy or some butch straight acting lad either - just average, so I initially though if someone asks me then I would be open as I see no reason why I should hide my identity at 35 years of age.

The first prison I encountered was dated, dirty, oppressive and full of homophobic remarks, these however, did not come from fellow inmates but from an officer on the wing who appeared to take great satisfaction from it. The comments themselves were childish playground remarks coming from a grown up “adult”, and one that works for an organisation that promotes and tolerates diversity amongst fellow colleagues and inmates. I, in order to avoid him, remained in my cell more and subsequently found the following couple of weeks difficult, then I

was offered a transfer to where I am now. It is a privately run prison and is so so different, I am not by any means dancing around the wing to Abba but the atmosphere is far more relaxed, I have met many supportive inmates and staff who know that I am gay, we enjoy banter from time to time like mates on the outside and my sexuality is never mentioned as it's of no interest. A couple of people have in confidence approached me for advice, so if me being quietly out benefits others then at least I am serving a purpose and turning the experience into a positive one.



I realise that I should have been more pro-active in my previous prison and voiced my concerns, but at the time I did not know who to turn to for advice and instead allowed myself to be verbally bullied by that officer. One day retribution will land on his doorstep, and hopefully he will be reprimanded and along

with all the other officers in the prison service be taught the meaning of the word “diversity” and in this day and age homophobic comments towards any LGBT person is not tolerated!

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*“if me being quietly out benefits others then at least I am serving a purpose and turning the experience into a positive one.”*

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## Directory of LGBT Groups in Prison:



Coming  
Soon!!

Is there a LGBT Support Group in your prison? Are you the Diversity Rep for gay prisoners? Do you write a newsletter for gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or trans prisoners or organise LGBT events inside? *Let us know!*

We are currently creating a LGBT Prisoner Support Group Directory, which will be distributed amongst friends of the Bent Bars Project. If you want your group or resource to be included in the Directory, please send us details (which prison, contact person, how often you meet, what resources are available, etc).

### Note on our editorial Policy:

The Bent Bars Collective aims to publish contributions as they are submitted, without making editorial changes to content or style (beyond spelling and grammar corrections when necessary). However, due to space constraints, some articles are edited for length. We also will not publish any material which reinforces stereotypes or expresses oppressive attitudes towards others.

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*The Bent Bars Project is a letter-writing program that connects lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender-variant, intersex, and queer communities across prison walls. If you would like more information or would like to request a penpal, please drop us a line.*



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